

LEAH SOIBEL

Israel Is a Hispanic Opportunity



EWS around the world hovered nervously over crackling radios on November 29, 1947, as member states of the United Nations determined Israel's fate with a simple one-syllable vote. For a decisive number of countries, that word was a resounding *sí*.

As geopolitics shifted in the years that followed, so did relations between Israel and the Spanish-speaking world. Of the 12 Latin-American countries that voted, along with 21 others, for the Jewish state in 1947, several would not do so today. At the same time, at least some of the six Latin countries that abstained then are today among Israel's biggest supporters.

Latinos could once again have an impact on Israel's future, this time as Israel's strongest ally.

As someone who works on the front lines of Israel's communications war in Spanish and Spanglish, I know that we have strong allies within the U.S. Hispanic community. But those relationships cannot be taken for granted.

Today, some 63 million people in America — nearly 19 percent of the population — describe themselves as Hispanic. That figure will rise to about 30 percent by the middle of the century. It's a trend that can have powerful implications for the U.S.-Israel relationship, as political and cultural outlooks change among young people, Hispanics included.

The 2022 midterm results demonstrated that Latinos do not vote as a bloc. Like American Jews, American Latinos are aspirational immigrant communities hailing from numerous countries and cultures. Also, like Jews, Hispanics are generally mistakenly regarded as a monolithic group by those seeking votes ahead of elections.

The rest of the time, Latinos are mostly ignored — but not by everybody.

If you don't speak Spanish, then you probably don't know about the campaigns against Israel, and to some extent Jews, in the Hispanic world. Most of those campaigns originated in Spain, spread rapidly throughout Latin America, and are now testing the Latino community in the United States.

Iran, Russia, and others have long understood the importance of connecting with Latinos. HispanTV, Tehran's 24/7 news network, is heavily invested in disseminating the mullahs' messages of hate in Spanish, reaching a vast audience in the U.S. and elsewhere through its TV and digital news presence. The same is true for Qatar's AJ+, Russia's RT, and many other multimillion-dollar state-sponsored and independent media networks.

Once prevalent only in Latin America, these sites now reach millions in the United States across social-media platforms, including YouTube.

Unfortunately, Israel lacks similar international networks. And with a deeply rooted tendency to preach to the converted, an Israeli-crafted engagement strategy would probably not resonate, even if it had the inclination and ability to connect in Spanish.

Why should you care about any of this?

Spanish is the second-most-spoken language in America. The median age of U.S. Latinos is 31, about nine years younger than the rest of the population, and we use social media to consume news and information more than other ethnic groups do, making us primary targets for disinformation.

The quickest way to connect with millions of people in a short amount of time is through mass media, and we Hispanics are major consumers of news and information in both Spanish and Spanglish. We thrive on social media, especially Instagram and YouTube. TikTok is our playground. Meanwhile, radio, the same method of communication that relayed the 1947 vote in real time, remains a major medium for Spanish-speakers.

Although social-media giants claim to be combating hate speech on their platforms in English, disinformation in other languages is unchecked. These arenas share a common theme: a lack of compelling, Spanish-speaking Israeli and Jewish voices. The silence will present a major challenge to Israel in the coming years, with a gradual, negative shift in Hispanic public opinion on the Jewish state.

The digital pogroms that erupted over the 2021 Israel–Hamas war prompted Fuente Latina, the nonprofit and nonpartisan media organization I founded, to conduct nationwide research to better understand how Millennial Americans view the conflict. Results were eye-opening. Focus groups showed that long-standing messaging employed by many Jewish and pro-Israel organizations—such as that Israel has a right to defend itself—no longer resonate. Pro-Israel

messengers were dismissed as disingenuous for talking only about Israel's suffering.

Of the young (18–35) Hispanics polled, some 37 percent believe that Hamas is a terrorist organization, compared with 33 percent who say Hamas is defending the Palestinian people, and 30 percent who are unsure. The proportion of Latinos who believe that Hamas is protecting the Palestinians is higher than in all other ethnic groups surveyed in this study. Latinos also appear to more frequently embrace classic antisemitic beliefs than other Americans do, though the *overall* number of Latinos of all age groups who hold a positive view of Israel is greater than for white Americans.

The challenge is the trend. Fuente Latina's study showed a decline in support for Israel since 2010 among English-speaking Latinos under 30, particularly among women. And in tandem with other Americans their age, many young Latinos view events in Israel through a racial-identity lens. Sadly, this perspective, as it is widely marketed today, tends to side with those seeking Israel's destruction. Digital media outlets such as AJ+ are capitalizing on this zeitgeist to our detriment.

The good news is that Fuente Latina's study, along with my thousands of hours of one-on-one conversations with Latino leaders, reveals that Hispanics are, for the most part, still undecided when it comes to Israel. This glass-half-full situation should be seen as an opportunity, but it's unclear how long that data will hold true unless we communicate our story ourselves, in both Spanish and Spanglish.



I'm frequently asked how to keep this relationship healthy. Here is my prescription:

When it comes to appreciating and understanding Israel, there is no substitute for experiencing the country personally. Many Latinos,

regardless of their age or religious affiliation, regard visiting Israel, or *Tierra Santa*, as a lifelong dream and a top destination on bucket lists. On these trips, authentic interactions with Spanish-speaking Israelis are vital. Israel is home to a vibrant Latin-American immigrant community. As immigrants to Israel, many have incredible stories to tell, and they can give insight into the complexity of Israeli life beyond the headlines and social-media memes.

We must also invest in strategic new Latino relationships while maintaining existing ones. Many new relationships are being forged by Hispanic Evangelical Christians, who make up 19 percent of the U.S. Latino population today and are slated to increase in numbers in the coming years. More and more of the Hispanic Protestant population is skewing younger, but their support for Israel isn't an absolute given.

U.S. Latinos are as diverse as America itself and therefore cannot be addressed with any single approach. Twenty-eight million consider themselves multiracial, and more than 36 percent of Hispanic homes are bilingual. This means that communicating with Hispanic audiences requires a nuanced and tested approach. Translating English messages into Spanish and blasting them at a culturally diverse audience while hoping for the best isn't going to work.

On the flip side, many Hispanics are reaching out to the Jewish community. Genetic studies reveal that a significant percentage—some scholars say up to 25 percent—of Latin Americans and U.S. Latinos are of crypto-Jewish heritage. Discovering Jewish roots with a DNA test can spark a curiosity that many fulfill by traveling to Israel or visiting a local synagogue or simply talking to Jewish people. There is an untapped potential within this Hispanic community to create new friends Israel didn't know existed.

We should also see media as a tool that brings us together. As much as we complain about press coverage, digital media give us the oppor-

tunity to take control of the narrative and tell our own stories. But the storytellers have to be authentic, not *hasbara* spokespeople. That is why Fuente Latina recently launched Activista Media, to engage the next generation of English-dominant non-Jewish Latinos with visually appealing and culturally relevant content.

Finally, we need to bust out of our own echo chambers by changing our messaging with non-Jewish Latinos, even if it pushes our traditional boundaries. Being honest about what moves the needle and what doesn't with non-Jewish audiences is a first step. Focus-group testing can help to determine what messages and messengers will change narratives and perceptions of Israel among audiences in the long term.

While the days of tallying up votes as history is made over the airwaves are long gone, our relationship with the Spanish-speaking world is more important now than ever. *Vamos.* *

LEAH SOIBEL, the founder and CEO of Fuente Latina, is a Hispanic-American Israeli who has worked for two decades with global non-Jewish Hispanic media to ensure accurate coverage of Israel and the Jewish world.